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Tribal Gaming Constitutional Amendments Filed to Level the Playing Field Among Texas Tribes

(Austin, TX) – Today, Senator Jose Rodríguez (D-El Paso) and State Representative Senfronia Thompson (D-Houston) filed SJR 51 and HJR 129, respectively, proposing a constitutional amendment authorizing gaming on tribal lands belonging to the Alabama-Coushatta Tribes of Texas and the Ysleta del Sur Pueblo (also known as the Tigua Indian Tribe).

"We are proposing a constitutional amendment that will bring equal treatment, fairness and equity to our three Texas tribes. We already have gaming in Texas but for only one tribe and that's not right. The Alabama-Coushatta in southeast Texas and the Tiguas in El Paso deserve equal treatment with the Kickapoos in Eagle Pass," said Sen. Rodríguez and Rep. Thompson.

The current inequity exists because the Alabama-Coushatta and Tigua tribes were federally recognized under the Restoration Act in 1987. The Restoration Act prohibits the Alabama-Coushatta and Tigua tribes from participating in all gaming activities that the state of Texas prohibits. The Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas were federally recognized in 1983 without any prohibition on the tribe's right to offer gaming.

"Gaming would benefit the entire state, and especially benefit El Paso, in my Senate district. In El Paso County, gaming by the Tigua Nation would provide jobs for the community, as well as valuable funds for health care, education, and other opportunities for the tribe," Senator Rodríguez said. *"Statewide, full gaming would add another regional attraction; the more visitors we have, the more hotel nights, restaurant patrons and shoppers we have. The state currently is engaged in a budgeting debate, and seeking additional revenue sources. Well, here is an opportunity to do just that, an opportunity that more than two dozen states, including our neighbors in Oklahoma, already have taken."*

The Kickapoos have seen a tremendous economic growth to its reservations and to the City of Eagle Pass since the opening of the Lucky Eagle Casino in 1996. They are proof positive that tribal gaming can be a win-win.

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Rep. Thompson read the following statement from Rep. Poncho Nevárez whose district includes the Kickapoo Traditional Tribe of Texas:

"As the State Representative for the Kickapoo Nation, I fully support their ability to conduct gaming in Eagle Pass and would like to see them be able to fully exercise their gaming rights as provided in a resolution I filed this session, HJR 22. Gaming has had a positive impact on the economy and the Kickapoo's Lucky Eagle Casino is a beneficial tourist attraction and source of income for the community. I am also supportive of Rep. Thompson's efforts to restore gaming rights of the other two federally recognized tribes of Texas, the Alabama-Coushatta and Tigua nations. The Kickapoo Nation was benefitted tremendously as they were lifted out of dire poverty and gaming put them on the road to a place of wellness, engagement in the community, and prosperity that they would have never known without the ability to conduct gaming."

Rep. Thompson said, *"This is not a new issue nor is it a move to expand the footprint of gaming in Texas. I have supported efforts to bring gaming opportunities to Texas racetracks in the past and I will be supportive of any future efforts,"* Rep. Thompson continued, *"But it is time to have a tribal-only proposal in Texas. Both the Alabama-Coushatta and Tigua Tribes deserve the same chance to build a strong healthy, economy for their tribes and contribute to the economic development of the counties and cities surrounding their tribal lands."*

The state lottery, pari-mutuel racing, bingo and other forms of gambling already operate in Texas.

The state of Texas could also benefit. If passed, the constitutional amendment will divert five percent of the net proceeds from gaming on tribal lands to the state's general revenue fund.

Joining Rep. Thompson and Sen. Rodríguez at the announcement were joint authors of HJR 129, Rep. Mary Gonzalez and Rep. Cesar Blanco both from El Paso and Rep. James White (R-Woodville), whose district includes the Alabama-Coushatta reservation in southeast Texas.

“I am proud to joint author this resolution with Rep. Thompson. We worked on it together in the past and we will continue to push for parity for Texas tribes. I am confident that the Alabama-Coushatta tribe in my district, given the chance, would run a successful business with integrity,” said Representative White.

Under the proposal, the responsibility for regulating tribal gaming operations would not be borne by the state of Texas. The tribes would submit their gaming ordinances to the assistant secretary for Indian affairs at the U.S. Department of Interior (DOI) and all gaming operations would be regulated by DOI. Approximately 240 tribes across the nation operate gaming facilities.

If either SJR 51 or HJR 129 passes, the constitutional amendment would go before Texas voters on the November 2015 ballot.